



An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding

David Hume (1711 - 1776)

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An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding by David Hume was published in 1748 and is a shortened revision of his masterwork, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which met with a disappointing reception when published anonymously in 1739. In revising he eliminated material from the *Treatise* and focused on clarifying and emphasizing its most important elements. The resulting book articulates Hume's theory of knowledge in a logical sequence of incremental steps. The first six sections outline the epistemology, and the latter six sections discuss its application to specific topics. Hume is one of the founding proponents of empiricism, and holds that mental activity falls into two groups, direct impressions of experience that have the strongest

effect, and ideas, which are memories and imaginings and somewhat less forceful. He goes on to treat the association of ideas, the nature of understanding and doubt, and the roles of habit and probability. His arguments take the reader to the edge of what he acknowledges are the limits of knowledge, and in doing so he delves into the difficult subjects of liberty, theology and miracles. The book was highly influential upon release, has served as a key influence on giants such as Immanuel Kant, and is rightly regarded as a classic in modern philosophy. It is especially worth examining at the present time given the attention given to the problems of truth in public affairs.

David Hume (May 7, 1711 – August 25, 1776) was a Scottish intellectual who made key contributions to the disciplines of philosophy, history, and economics during his lifetime. He is best known as a philosopher who ranks with Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Thomas Hobbes as a British Empiricist. He attempted to establish a naturalistic science of psychology, holding that all knowledge is founded on experience, either sensations or ideas derived from reasoning about experience, and that passion rather than reason governs human behavior. He was born in Edinburgh the second son of an advocate who died when David was two; his mother, daughter of Lord Falconer, never remarried. Hume entered University of Edinburgh at age 12 to study law but instead pursued philosophy and general learning. He reported making a philosophical discovery at age 18 that opened “a new Scene of Thought” and led to years of study and *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), now considered one of the most important works in western philosophy but poorly received at the time. He was eventually made librarian at the University of Edinburgh in 1752, where he researched and wrote his massive six-volume *History of England*, which brought him the literary recognition he coveted. He later served the English embassy in Paris and famously quarreled with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He is also known for “My Own Life”, a biographical essay summarizing his life in “fewer than 5 pages”.